

Paradise Found? Ana / chronic Nostalgia in *Belle Epoque*

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At a first glance, Fernando Trueba's Academy Award winning film *Belle Epoque* (1992) could be read as a celebration of the regained paradise of absolute freedom, physical beauty and unbound desires. On another level, it could also be seen as a symptomatic result of disillusion with the present, confirming the impossibility of recovering that lost paradise, as well as an effect of the already chronic "historical amnesia" characteristic of post-Franco Spain. These contradictory readings reveal the fissures of two diametrically opposed and dissonant narratives, simultaneously leaning towards the realm of utopian fiction and nostalgic revisionism. It makes us wonder whether Trueba's film brings about the liberation of individual male and female subjectivities and desires, or is it just another "male fantasy".

Belle Epoque is perhaps all of the above, a celebration and a refiguration of the pre-modern past, based on nostalgia, but it is also a clear sign of the current times and an implicit commentary on the disenchantment with the present. Its huge success is both a clear symptom and a result of the current malaise of *desencanto* and lack of historical memory, or rather, the overwhelming desire to forget about the past and construct a new history best suited to our contemporary mores, dominated by a *laissez faire* attitude. The film explores freely the pleasures forbidden by the repressive social order (thus the anticlerical, antimilitary and antibourgeois clichés reminiscent of other Spanish directors like Luis Buñuel, Luis Berlanga and Carlos Saura), and by patriarchy (with some concessions to feminist ideas). This exploration, however, is achieved through the suppression of the historical, thus risking to reduce the film to an escapist wish fulfilment devoid of a truly subversive value.

Belle Epoque is a colourful, exuberant and lush romantic comedy of a young army deserter seducing, and being seduced by, the four daughters of a free thinking painter in the imaginary "Belle époque" between the end of the Monarchy and the Proclamation of the Spanish II Republic in 1931, before the bloodshed of the Spanish Civil War. The setting of the film is made to correspond to a reconstructed "Belle Epoque", a presumably peaceful interlude between wars, as well as an exceptional period of unbound freedoms between the military dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera in the 1920s and that of General Franco following the war.

This episode of Spanish history is rewritten by director Fernando Trueba and scripwriter Rafael Azcona as a Belle Epoque, although what is conventionally understood by "Belle Epoque" is not the turbulent 1930s but an earlier period before World War I, as Trueba himself acknowledges: "The real 'Belle Epoque' period was at the turn of the century. My meaning is literally 'a beautiful time' or 'a good time'. Perhaps even a little out of time with different rules".¹ A double effect of displacement occurs with this shifting operation of the historical referent: first, by erasing the turbulence of the period and rewriting it as a historical parenthesis, outside of history, and second, by anachronically displacing it to an earlier, "kinder, gentler" age. This time of exception and euphoria, of historical parenthesis, is removed from the realm of history to the realm of myth. "Belle époque" is then rewritten as a mythical time, a time of innocence and beauty, symbolizing a paradise lost. The director again explains: "...I chose the title to talk about the belle époque of the characters. For me the title reminds [me] of a lost paradise, a time past that was wonderful but (is) never going to come back".² The film was appropriately subtitled for its American release "The Age of Beauty", inviting the spectator to join in for a walk through the garden of Eden in its recreation of that lost paradise of the age of innocence and the discovery of the pleasures of life. As Trueba again explained, "Belle époque is the story of Paradise: too good to last. It's about the discovery of life, but the real one: freedom, art, love, sex, friendship. ...All the things that make life interesting".³ Unfortunately, the recovery of that lost paradise in the film, too good to be true, is achieved through the loss of historical memory.

In its romanticised, nostalgic revision of the 1930s from the 1990s, *Belle Epoque* constructs a new ahistorical past where the conflictive realities of the 1930s -as well as the dark realities of today - have been erased from memory, calling for an uncritical suspension of truth. Indeed, the whole film could be seen as one long, beautiful lie, a lapse of historical reason, wishful thinking, undoubtedly beautiful, but

a lie nevertheless. This situation is mirrored in the film itself by the mother's delusions and her refusal to confront reality. Her cheerful news regarding the enormous success of her recent South American *zarzuela* tour (she is a Spanish opera singer), is met with the silent complicity of her French manager and lover, who will only later break the news to the family -and the spectator- about the real financial losses incurred by her tour.

Interestingly enough, Trueba has commented that making films set in the past like *Belle Époque* or the earlier *El año de las luces* (*The Year of the Awakening*, 1986) liberated him from the great tyranny of reality, the dead weight of historical accuracy, invoking instead poetic licence and invention: "Every time I've made a period movie I've felt quite free as a writer. When you are making a contemporary movie, everyone can judge what you've done. When you're doing a movie set in the past, you can invent more things".⁴ In another interview, Trueba declared that he had directed this film as a reaction "contra el muermo que nos invade" :against the current boredom', adding that "la libertad que tiene esta película no te la puedes permitir en la época actual" 'nowadays you cannot allow yourself the freedom this film has', reflecting a chronic disenchantment with the present and the desire to anachronically reinvent the past, by imposing present desires upon the historical past.⁵

The same creative freedom was employed in the creation of the film's wardrobe. Some of the ideas for the costumes in *Belle Époque* were taken from photographs of Spain's early intellectuals and sportswomen of the period, fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Blanco y Negro* and paintings by Gutiérrez Solana. But as *Belle Époque*'s wardrobe director Lala Huete explained, the free floating, sensual, and "liberated" air of the clothing was directly inspired by Jean Renoir's 1937 pastoral film *Une partie de campagne* (*A Day in the Country*): "That was the concept -the fresh air, the joy, the movement, the sexuality, the light. I used that freedom to move through different time periods with the clothes. All the film is about that -freedom".⁶ The choice of light clothing (when most Spanish countrywomen in the 1930s would wear strictly dark) or Violeta's wide trousers and men's shirts were at odds with historical reality, since, as Huete reminds us, "At that time, only maybe five women in the country wore trousers and they were either painters or intellectuals".

In all respects of his film, Trueba turns to the higher authority of freedom (both artistic and individual); on the one hand, the autonomy of filmic creation, as he learned from Billy Wilder's *Love in the Afternoon*, which he describes as "a perfect universe with its own rules" (La Badie); on the other hand, he turns to personal rather than political freedom, as he reasons: "My movie is about freedom, the joy of life, more than about politics. In *Belle Époque* the only (political) commentary is about people who are against freedom. The movie for me is sympathizing with libertarian ideas" (Parks).

For Trueba, *Belle Époque* amounts to a rejection of reality as known and instead an affirmation of reality as ideally imagined, espousing freedom of the mind, and favoring utopian imagination:

This is not a film about the way life is but how I would like life to be. It's very utopian and idealistic. Movies don't always have to reflect life. Sometimes they have to reflect how people dream they'd like to be. With this film I'm trying to make people happy. The spirit of the film is tolerance. ...of other people's feelings.⁷

Again, at first glance, *Belle Époque* appears as an affirmation of the possibility of finding heaven on earth, the discovery of a utopian paradise, akin to the anarchist, libertarian spirit of utopian fiction. Bodies and desires are unbound in a paradise regained, with no forbidden fruit and no guardian angels. There everything is possible with true camaraderie, free love, and the dismantling of the state repressive apparatuses: mainly the church, the armed forces and the reactionary bourgeoisie. But, unlike the literature of anticipation, the utopian fiction promoted by anarchist writers, which in Spain climaxed precisely during the 1930s⁸, looking forward to that earthly paradise in the future, *Belle Époque* instead looks back to an imagined past that never was. Therefore, its use of nostalgia is in essence ideologically regressive.

The contradiction at heart of the film's libertarian values is embodied by Manolo, the old frustrated painter, an Anarchist at heart trapped in bourgeois comfort, haunted by three life-long personal frustrations. His unsuccessful attempts at rebellion against the bastions of tradition include his inability to rebel against the army because he was flat footed, to rebel against the church because he never made it as an altar boy, and to rebel against the bourgeois institution of matrimony by committing adultery because of his alleged impotence (except with his long absent wife).

The conflicting masquerade of revolutionary principles in bourgeois costumes is also inscribed in the filmic style. This disagreement is mirrored in the film's aesthetic displacement from violent tragedy to romantic comedy. fluctuating from burlesque farse to mythical fable. The film opens with a most brutal, violent scene reminiscent of the horrors of Goya and Buñuel, filmed in dark, sinister tones, and

representing the grotesque death of two Civil Guards (one killing the other, his father-in-law, and then committing suicide), as the result of their mutual stubbornness and political confrontation in the turmoil after the military uprising against King Alfonso XIII in 1930. This scene, signalling the end of the old military regime but also anticipating the future civil war, marks the end of the old patriarchal national family and the beginning of a new age, a parenthetical time without repressive forces. The framing of the story with the initial truculent killing of the guardias civiles predisposes the spectator for another fratricidal historical drama of the Spanish Civil War. Instead the film will take the spectator to the gates of a mythical paradise, a peaceful oasis of love, beauty, friendship, and fulfilled desires. The opening sequence -with its grotesque violence and black humour -contrasts with and reinforces the luminous belle époque effect of the rest of the film, underlining the entrance in a new order traditionally coded as feminine. From then on the light is soft and diaphanous, the colours lush and sensual, the music mellow, the mise en scene gentle and delicate. Later in the film, the rather gratuitous suicide of Don Luis, the angst-ridden priest and follower of Miguel de Unamuno's tragic sense of life doctrine, also marks the end of the Catholic church (as well as the patriarchal institution of marriage, since in the absence of the village priest the young lovers will not be able to get married). Both are represented in the past that young Fernando has left behind: the seminary and the military (he is a deserter from both). Now that he has freed himself from both institutions, the gates of paradise are beginning to open...

In his sojourn at the Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise with heavenly bodies but not sexless angels, male and female desires are discovered and liberated. During this season in Heaven, Fernando, the "seminarista" or "seminarian", as is called by the four sisters, acts more like a true seminal, falling in love consecutively with each of Manolo's four daughters. Her names, Rocio, Clara, Violeta, and Luz (recalling the fragrance of a garden, and the light and sensuality a French Impressionist painting), also suggest four beautiful flowers in the Garden of Delights. At the same time, each of the four sisters sees her desires fulfilled by Fernando, without being able to distinguish clearly who is seducing and who is being seduced in the process. This confusion of gender roles and the series of gender-bending reversals is one of the highmarks of the film, best exemplified in the superb carnival sequence with Violeta dressed in army uniform and Fernando dressed in drag as a maid. The carnival cross-dressing scene is a clear homage to Billy Wilder's *Some Like it Hot* (I am fond of the Spanish queer translation *Con faldas y a lo loco*), but also to Wilder's *Stalag 17* and Jean Renoir's *La Grand Illusion*, with their anarchical gender-bending dancing scenes in the midst of war. The carnival party and its aftermath in the hay represents the Bakhtinian time of subversion of the law, the celebration of an upside down social order; for Bakhtin the carnival offers "a new mode on interrelationship between individuals", which allows "the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves".⁹ As Trueba affirms, the carnival party and its reversal of sexual roles, clothes, and gender identities, is really speaking to us about the present.

At that time [the carnival] you are saying you can't separate the sexes so easily. ...Spain has been such a macho country for years, but I don't think it's macho anymore. I think this macho thing is always trying to hide something fragile and feminine. (Stone)

In spite of this clear debunking of machismo and the overt liberation of libidinal desires, *Belle Époque* has been criticized by some anglo-American reviewers as, if not downright sexist, at least the product of a romantic male fantasy. For Jeff Simon, the film is "sweet-natured" but "clearly nostalgic of a pre-feminist sexual order"¹⁰ and, for Howie Movshovitz, *Belle Époque* is

a male fantasy of a naive young man. ...although the sexism is at least lightweight this time around. What saves the movie is that the young women have minds and desires of their own -no one is used -and that a delicate feeling of libertine rebellion waifs through the movie...¹¹

For British cultural critic Paul Julian Smith, the film "transparent" and "heterosexual wish-fulfilment is partially mitigated" by the passive male's humiliation on the part of active females.¹² Naturally, Trueba himself is again his best advocate:

every work of creation is someone's fantasy But you have to be fair to the other sex, to treat others the same way you would like to be treated. I don't care about being politically correct, though. That's an American thing that -thank God -doesn't exist in Europe yet. Humour isn't compatible with political correctness. (Denerstein)

It does not help that Trueba has constructed elsewhere, perhaps humorously, but politically incorrect nevertheless, a patriarchal film family tree in which "Jean Renoir is the grandfather, Billy Wilder the father, Lubitsch and Sturges the uncles, Truffaut the eldest brother and Woody Allen the best friend" (R. C. Smith). But whether the film might be considered a humorous male fantasy in a pre- or post-feminist world, the fact remains that female desires are positively fulfilled, patriarchal authority is openly demythified, and intolerance and bigotry are thoroughly ridiculed. The healthy laughter of unrestrained pleasures and the joy of absolute freedom are all around. Can anybody ask for more?

The predominant idyllic, joyful and pastoral tone of this romantic comedy is diametrically opposed to the gravity and anguish of Garcia Lorca's rural tragedies of blood, sacrifice and violence. In fact, *Belle Epoque* is an almost exact inversion of the archetypal *House of Bernarda Alba*, the most recognizable representation of patriarchal authority and repressed (female) desires in the context of the 1930s in Spain. If in *Bernarda Alba* the house symbolizes patriarchal dominion, the enforced chastity and silence of the nunnery, the asylum for the mad woman in the attic, and the lack of freedom of the prison, in *Belle Epoque* the house represents the paradise where the liberation of repressed desires, pleasures, bodies and silenced voices becomes possible.

In Lorca's drama, the female body is the site of repression and subjugation to the rules and norms of patriarchal society; although men are conspicuously absent from representation, the power of patriarchy is deeply felt throughout the play. In Trueba's film, however, the body is a site of recreation, of ludic exploration and sensual discovery. The claustrophobic incarceration of Bernarda's daughters, suffocated inside the house with all windows permanently closed, is inverted in *Belle Epoque*'s wide open windows, best captured in that bright early morning scene when each daughter rejoicingly opens her window to see and hear her singing mother returning home from her American tour with her French manager (and lover). The point of view of the shooting, with the camera's travelling forth move through the window in fact forces the spectator to share the gaze of the daughters looking out, inviting the spectator to jump free into the world outside.

In *Belle Epoque* the tyrannical patriarchal mother is replaced by an impotent and anarchist patriarch. The figure of the overpowering absent father is reversed by the indulgent absent mother (independently living abroad). The confined daughters dressed in severe mourning clothes in *Bernarda Alba* are free to come and go in their light, pastel colour dresses in *Belle Epoque*. The invisible Pepe el romano, the obscure object of the sisters' desire in *Bernarda Alba* is here replaced by the ever present and ever available Fernando. The spirit of Bernarda endures only -though comically chastised- in the dominant and castrating Doña Asun the mother of Juanito, the irresolute Carlista-turned Republican-turned again Carlista.

Against the painful austerity, the law of silence, and the delirious obsession with the cleanliness of honor, virginity, and the "virtues" of the old and intolerant Catholic Spain so well represented in *Bernarda Alba*, *Belle Epoque* represents the exuberance, the unleashing of repressed voices of joy, laughter, and pleasure, and the new virtues of tolerance and permissiveness, where sexuality is not only not forbidden but triumphantly celebrated.

Against this background, I would like to pose one last question: What does Trueba's reconstruction of an idealized national past tell us about the present? Clearly, the extraordinary success of Trueba's film (the number one box office and video release hit in the history of Spanish cinema) proves that it hit a nerve with Spanish audiences, very often reluctant to accept the products of its national cinema,¹³ *Belle Epoque* celebrates uncomplicated love, family permissiveness, political and religious tolerance, predominant values in today's secular Spanish society. Again, at first glance, one is tempted to ask "and what's wrong with that?" *Belle Epoque* points out a desire and need to construct a new history, based on the spirit of equality, acceptance, and freedom, qualities not abounding in the no-so-distant national past. But by embellishing the past, *Belle Epoque* legitimizes the ahistoricity, or lack of historical memory of contemporary Spanish society. The ideology of *desencanto*, the profound disillusion with the prosaic present and without idealistic hopes for the future, favours a return to a past romanticized and sentimentalized, substituting nostalgia for historical memory and innocuous sex comedy for social drama. In the spirit of reconciliation of the Spanish political transition and the resulting collective loss of historical memory, the film has erased all the violence and cruelty, and all the political and social conflicts that characterized the 1930s and in particular the bloodshed of the Civil War and its aftermath. The imagined harmony thus achieved surely appears specially comforting in the confusing era of AIDS, political correctness, violence, crime, terrorism and political corruption and negativism.

The Academy Award granted to *Belle Epoque* for best foreign language film in 1994 is also evidence of the inoffensive, innocuous and ultimately conservative tone of the film, showing that its purportedly libertarian and utopian message can be mass-consumed by international audiences without

any danger of subverting the established order. The other side of carnival, obvious but often overlooked, is that the carnival is by definition a time of exception, again a parenthetical time frame with the assurance of the eventual return to normality and the reimposition of the order temporarily transgressed. For all the charming erotic flirtations and amusing gender reversals, the film ultimately celebrates heterosexual monogamy (we should remember Manolo can only have sex with his wife; Violeta is reminded she should get married with a "nice girl" ; Luz and Fernando finally go to the altar together). In the end, *Belle Epoque* reinforces the ideological underpinnings of mainstream cinema and order is finally restored: Juanito recuperates his lost faith and becomes again a Carlista, the daughters go back to Madrid, Manolo's wife embarks on another zarzuela tour, and the young lovers finally get married by common law (if without a church ceremony). The happy ending of the film, with the young couple's departure for America, in pursuit of freedom and happiness portrays not only Fernando's wish to make it in the new world, but also represents Fernando Trueba's ultimate wish fulfilled, that of reaching the earthly paradise and making it in the promised land of cinema. Apparently, *Belle Epoque* aims for a godless cinematic paradise in which Billy Wilder stands in for God, to recall Fernando Trueba's famous Oscar acceptance speech: "I would like to believe in God in order to thank him, but I just believe in Billy Wilder. So, thank you, Mr. Wilder" (Denerstein).

Fernando Trueba has made in *Belle Epoque* a metaphorical spectacle of the female body, identifying it as a site for an alternative construction of nationhood and Spanish identity more in line with today's modern aspirations. The young women bodies, free and unconstrained, luscious and beautiful, represent the new democratic Spain of the Second Republic. By "making over" this turbulent period of Spanish history, glossing over the real social and cultural conflicts of the times, the film reveals the contemporary collective desires for historical "correction" and embellishment of the past. As this reading of *Belle Epoque* shows, after the expulsion from paradise and the fall from Eden, this "liberation" is a lost paradise recoverable only in purely imaginary cinematic terms. In the end, after the carnival is over, with the unmasking and removal of costumes, there only remains the memory of a time that may have seemed like paradise, but clearly is only nostalgia.

O. T.: *Belle Epoque*. Production: Lola Films/ Animatógrafo/French Production (Spain-Portugal-France, 1992). Producer: Fernando Trueba. Director: Fernando Trueba. Screenplay: Rafael Azcona, José Luis García Sánchez and Fernando Trueba. Photography: José Luis Alcaine. Music: Antoine Duhamel. Art Director: Juan Botella. Editor: Carmen Frías. Leading Players: Penélope Cruz, Miriam Díaz-Aroca, Gabino Diego, Fernando Fernán Gómez, Michel Galabru, Ariadna Gil, Agustín González, Chus Lampreave, Mari Carmen Ramírez, Jorge Sanz, Maribel Verdú. Color -108 min.

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